FROM THE BOOKSHELF

'Australian Cryptozoology' by Gary Opit, 2009 (pp 162).

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This ring-bound, A4-sized self-published work is the latest addition to the already strong tradition of cryptozoological work emanating from the Big Brown Land. It joins the offerings of such as Healy & Cropper (1994), Smith (1996) and other works on 'bunyips', 'Tim the Yowie-Man' (2001), etc, a veritable string of books specifically dedicated to the thylacine ('Tasmanian Tiger'); also: sections in works on Australian mysteries (including spectacular claims about e.g. surviving populations of the 'giant goanna' *megalania* and even surviving dinosaurs in the writings of the maverick Rex Gilroy, whom Opit takes seriously as a 'naturalist'; see p 27); Australia-focused sections in general cryptozoological books; various articles in *Cryptozoology* and other journals; and now of course web-based material

The indigenous fauna of Australasia is distinguished by the absence of any (scientifically recognised) placental land-dwelling mammals, which apparently never crossed the 'Wallace Line'; even the well-known dingo was introduced by Aboriginal people around 4,000 years ago *(note 1)*. In their place, we find the familiar marsupials and three species of monotreme (two in Australia) *(note 2).* The cryptids reported in Australia by more sober authors include: (a) surviving populations of large marsupials deemed extinct by mainstream scholarship (notably thylacines and the 'marsupial lion' *thylacoleo*); (b) out-of-place placentals (or quasi-placentals) such as big cats (as in the UK and eastern North America) and the 'yowie' (Australia's equivalent of the Asian yeti and the North American bigfoot/sasquatch); (c) animals of uncertain classification (notably the 'bunyip') *(see note 3).*

In his rather disjointed introduction, Opit first explains the focus of cryptozoology and summarises the content and character of much of the earlier Australian material. He then provides a string of summaries of Australian cryptid sightings, mainly of yowies, which would probably be better relocated to the relevant later chapters (see below).

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In the final section of the introduction, Opit engages in a critique of contemporary science in a manner typical of the genre, arguing on the strength of carefully selected facts that science has been much less successful than its practitioners would claim in arriving at accounts of aspects of the physical universe (including humanity itself). To some degree, in fact, he seems to adopt the popular view of science as concerned mainly with conclusions (rather than with the scientific method and the ongoing revision of theories in response to expanding knowledge) and the associated fringe perception of scientists as unwilling to consider new or non-standard ideas. In addition, he adopts the 'trendy' view of traditional belief systems (here, Aboriginal) as reflecting the true structure of the universe more accurately than contemporary science and thus demonstrating the superior wisdom of traditional peoples.

Some of Opit's own extrapolations from the scientific data he cites are themselves almost mystical and involve undefined claims about 'vibration', 'dimensions beyond light-speed', etc – again as is currently popular in New Age thought. This kind of extreme fringe claim is **not** required for or relevant to the substantiation of reports of flesh-and-blood cryptids. (Despite the above, Opit rejects the view of cryptids as paranormal entities; see p 57.) These reports, if valid, will (eventually, in favourable circumstances) meet the normal standards of scientific evidence and be accepted by mainstream thought; they cannot be usefully justified in terms of weaker empirical standards associated with non-standard pseudo-science. Opit's focus on these ideas will weaken the book in the eyes of scientists and is thus counter-productive. In addition, these ideas stand in confusing contrast with Opit's own stated and repeatedly instantiated commitment to the need for careful empirical study if cryptids – even those frequently reported anecdotally, as recounted in this and other books – are to be accepted as genuine (a pattern of conceptual tension familiar in this kind of context).

In the body of the book, Opit commences with an essentially uncontroversial discussion of the Australian environment, flora and fauna as it has developed over time (chapter 1) and a chapter (2) on 'Aboriginal people and the Australian mind'. This latter chapter again presents a highly positive view of traditional Aboriginal beliefs about the relationship between people and the land (identified in the introduction as 'proven' by scientific data).

Opit stresses Aboriginal beliefs surrounding the 'dreaming', and urges that all people embrace such ideas as reflecting spiritual reality and engendering more fruitful attitudes to humanity and the world *(note 4)*.

Although this point is not foregrounded in this chapter, Aboriginal beliefs of course include belief in the 'real' existence of creatures which count as cryptids in the context of 'western' science, and in fact the very distinction

between 'real' creatures and e.g. spiritual entities is typically interpreted differently in such traditions.

In the later chapters, reference is made to these ideas (and, interestingly for this reviewer, to the **names** of the cryptids in the relevant Aboriginal languages), as well as to modern reports of the creatures in question (involving either chance sightings or expeditions) and earlier discussions of these matters. All these types of datum are obviously of great interest. Opit reproduces newspaper reports and other documents, and refers where appropriate to physical evidence such as casts of alleged footprints, structures supposedly created by yowies, the bodies of animals apparently killed by cryptids, objects scraped or disturbed by them, etc (he includes photographs).

In these later chapters, Opit deals with yowies and a range of similar creatures (chapters 3-8), putatively marsupial 'cats' (chapter 10), anomalous 'big cats' (chapter 11), bunyips (chapter 12) and thylacines (chapter 13). He also includes discussion (chapter 9, i.e. pp 85-86, also pp 28-30) of the possibility of the local survival of *homo erectus*, whose remains have not actually been found in Australia but **have** been discovered, spectacularly, in long-insular Flores. In this context there is also a brief reference (p 28) to the 'hobbits' more recently found in Flores. The final chapter (14) deals with the *ri* or 'New Guinea mermaid', which he links with Elaine Morgan's highly controversial 'aquatic ape' theory of human evolution (which Opit takes very seriously, without however rehearsing the scholarly objections).

Again, interestingly for this reviewer, Opit refers (albeit very naïvely) to (quasi-)linguistic behaviour on the part of yowies (p 45); and in chapters 9 and 14 he summarises claims to the effect that cryptids probably representing surviving *homo erectus* exhibit linguistic behaviour (p 86) – compare Woods (1997), etc on the alleged (pre-)linguistic behaviour of sasquatches – and that the development of language was crucial in the differentiation of *homo sapiens* (and its closest relatives such as *erectus*?) from their hominid predecessors (pp 158-159; citing here Jared Diamond).

There is clearly a reasonable case to be made that some of these cryptids might be genuine animals; others are more suspect.

Opit is a serious (if at times arguably selective) student of the technical literature. Each chapter contains extensive references to relevant scientific literature, especially where it can (possibly sometimes dubiously) be adduced in support of his ideas, and a bibliography, and the work ends with a general bibliography.

There is clearly a reasonable case to be made that some of these cryptids might be genuine animals; others are more suspect. However, Opit personally is evidently totally persuaded that his cryptids are genuine animals and that the zoological mainstream is grossly in error in rejecting them. (He takes a similar view of non-Australian cryptids, accepting e.g. the 1967 Gimlin/Patterson sasquatch film as veridical and arguing against some skeptical points; see pp 73-74.) Indeed, he makes frequent statements in which the existence of a given cryptid species or a reported observation of a specimen is treated as a matter of plain fact. Some of these statements refer to field observations (often prolonged and/or repeated) reported by his associate Pixie Byrnes, who provides drawings of the animals. But in this context one might reasonably expect rather **photographs**, which would furnish some more of the hard evidence for these cryptids which – as Opit admits (p 14) – is at present often conspicuously minimal, despite the fact that the entities in question appear to observers to be flesh-and-blood animals like any other animal. (Of course, this is precisely why these alleged creatures remain cryptids.)

However convinced Opit himself is, he would do well to adopt a less forthright stance, and to take contrary mainstream views more seriously, if he wishes to influence the scholarly community. But he **has** given that community plenty to (re-)consider!

Notes

1. But note that mysterious animals closely resembling antlered deer are shown in the 'Bradshaw' rock art of the Kimberley (itself of disputed provenance); see e.g. Wilson (2006). Opit addresses the question of how various placental mammal species could have reached the Australian bush (e.g. p 57 on yowies, pp 115-118 on big cats) – with varying degrees of plausibility.
2. Remoter New Zealand's land-dwelling fauna is even sparser, and included no mammals at all until humans and accompanying *kiore* rats arrived, apparently around 1000 CE.
3. The main New Zealand cryptid reports involve the moa, a genus of giant ratite birds thought by most scholars to have been exterminated by the Polynesian settlers.
4. In this context, it should be noted that – as reported by e.g. Josephine Flood – some traditional Aborigines who become familiar with Europeans, especially scientists and such, perceive them as 'having no dreaming' and thus as 'going their own way'. But for many 'western' scholars, this emancipation from their people's own traditional beliefs is to be seen as part of the legacy of the Enlightenment from which science and critical philosophy emerged, and thus as **advantageous** – as long as the traditional beliefs are not merely discarded but rather taken into account both for such merit as they do possess and as objects of study in themselves.

References

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'Tim the Yowie-Man' (2001) *The Adventures of Tim the Yowie-Man, Cryptonaturalist*. Milson's Point (NSW): Random House.

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Woods, L. (1997) *Story in the Snow*. Lakeville (Minnesota): Galde Press.

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Review of *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* by Michael A. Jawer (with Marc S. Micozzi), Park Street Press/Inner Traditions, 2009, (pp 576). ISBN: 978-1-59477-288-7/ ISBN: 1-59477-288-6.
Reviewed by Jon Wainwright

There are certain words—holistic, paradigm, spiritual—that can trigger a sceptical frown, and, although these do crop up in this book, we are reassured by Larry Dossey's foreword as to 'the deep respect Jawer shows for the scientific tradition'. Michael Jawer himself believes that our 'intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives. . . are fueled by the physical.' This book is a 'scientific study of emotion' and 'of the energy that animates us' and he thinks we are 'on the verge of a vital new understanding of the human organism and its place in the universe.' Dossey also remarks that scientists, 'at least in theory, are supposed to be open to new findings', a line taken by some who are too quick to accuse scientists who disagree with them of not being 'open' to their ideas. Dossey goes on to suggest that because 'anomalous experiences' are widespread, they are not really anomalous, and that those 'who turn away from this area need a wake-up call, a reality check.' (One useful definition of anomalistic psychology is 'the study of extraordinary phenomena of behaviour and experience' (http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/what), and this is used by scientists who have very much turned *towards* the study of such experiences.)

At one point Michael Jawer asks: 'Why not turn the laser focus of science on the perennial conundrums of the anomalous? Surely society at large would benefit from an explanation, beyond the usual dismissals and cavalier putdowns.' Perhaps Jawer meant to say 'the laser focus of *neuro*science', otherwise he ignores the long tradition of scientific exploration in this area. Michael Faraday investigated table moving in the 1850s. W. K. Clifford thought there was no such thing as disembodied consciousness and he delighted in debunking paranormal claims in the 1870s. Research continued throughout the twentieth century and experiments testing paranormal claims have just been carried out by Chris French's Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit. Science *has* offered explanations (Faraday concluded that the sitters were unconsciously pulling and pushing the table) or else found that there is nothing to explain (the professional medium Patricia Putt scored zero out of ten in a recent test of her powers). Whether society chooses to accept these results is society's business, and beyond the influence of most scientists.

For the record, since they are not closed systems, living organisms do not defy the second law *(of thermodynamics)*.

Early in the chapter on energy, electricity and dissociation we read (p 109):

> 'Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about living organisms is that, so long as they are alive, they evidently defy the second law of thermodynamics, which states that, as the molecules of something randomly interact, their arrangement will, over time, become less and less ordered. This is also known as *entropy*. . . . the various forms of life. . . emerge into this world as highly organized individuals, growing and sustaining themselves *contrary to entropy*. . . . Of course, when they die their substance returns to being governed by the second law. But what about when they are alive? No question will ever be more basic to medicine, religion, philosophy, or science''.

Although this passage is incidental to the main themes of the book, I've picked it out for criticism because of the central importance of the second law for 'the whole of science, and hence in our rational understanding of the universe' (Peter Atkins, *Four Laws That Drive the Universe*, p 49). The authors could have been clearer in their handling of it. (For the record, since they are not closed systems, living organisms do not defy the second law.)

More trivial is Jawer's mistaken use of the phrase 'begs the question' when he simply means 'raises the question' rather than the logical fallacy of circular argument. This is a common mistake in journalism and broadcasting but less excusable in a philosopher—or a philosophically literate scientist. More important philosophically, he wants to replace the 'two divergent categories' of mind and body with Ken Dychtwald's term 'bodymind'. I'm not sure what he means by 'divergent' or whether Jawer understands 'category' here in the sense used by, for example, Gilbert Ryle in *Concept of Mind*. Most of the scientists and philosophers I've come across use the words 'mind' and 'body' without implying substance dualism. As well as